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AUTHOR Berkowitz, Robert E.
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ABSTRACT

Parents can play an important role in helping their children succeed in school. This ERIC Digest presents the Big Six Skills problem-solving method as an effective approach for parents. The Big Six Skills apply to any problem or activity that requires a solution or result based on information. The Big Six can help parents effectively deal with the abundance of information available from many sources to guide their children through school assignments. The Big Six consists of: task definition, information seeking strategies, location and access, use of information, synthesis, and evaluation. In this approach, the parent assumes the role of a "coach" while the child assumes the role of a "thinker and doer." The parent guides the student through all steps it takes to complete the assignment, while the child thinks about what he or she needs to do at each step and then finds appropriate ways to do it. The Big Six approach recognizes the benefits of technology such as computers, e-mail, and the Internet for organizing information and for access to non-traditional sources of information. The Big Six approach can help parents effectively guide their children through assignments and at the same time help their children become independent learners and users of information. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/SWC)

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Helping with Homework: A Parent's Guide to Information Problem-Solving

An ERIC Digest

by Robert E. Berkowitz

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ERIC DIGEST

November 1996 EDO-IR-96-09

Helping with Homework: A Parent's Guide to Information Problem-Solving

by Robert E. Berkowitz

This Digest is based on the ERIC monograph,
Helping with Homework: A Parent's Guide to Information Problem-Solving
by Michael B. Eisenberg & Robert E. Berkowitz

Introduction

Parents can play an important role in helping their children succeed in school, but they need an effective approach in order to do this well. The approach taken in the book, *Helping with Homework: A Parent's Guide to Information Problem-Solving*, is based on the Big Six Skills problem-solving approach. The Big Six Skills apply to any problem or activity that requires a solution or result based on information. An abundance of information is available from many sources, and the Big Six can help parents effectively deal with that information to guide their youngsters through school assignments.

The Big Six Approach

The Big Six approach has six components: task definition, information seeking strategies, location and access, use of information, synthesis, and evaluation.

- **Task Definition:** In the task definition stage, students need to determine what is expected from the assignment.
- **Information Seeking Strategies:** Once students know what's expected of them, they need to identify the resources they will need to solve the task as defined. This is information seeking.
- **Location & Access:** Next, the students must find potentially useful resources. This is location and access—the implementation of the information seeking strategy.
- **Use of Information:** Use of information requires the students to engage the information (e.g., read it) and decide how to use it (e.g., in text or in a footnote).
- **Synthesis:** Synthesis requires the students to repackage the information to meet the requirements of the task as defined.
- **Evaluation:** Finally, students need to evaluate their work on two levels before it is turned in to the teacher. Students need to know if their work will meet their teacher's expectations for (1) quality and (2) efficiency.

The Big Six steps may be applied in any order, but all steps must be completed.

Parents' Role and Students' Role

The Big Six approach requires parents and students to assume different roles. The parent assumes the role of a "coach" and the child assumes the role of "thinker and doer." As a coach, the parent can use the Big Six Skills to guide the student through all the steps it takes to complete the assignment. Parents can help by first asking their children to explain assignments in their own words. This is "task definition"—a logical first step. Parents can also help by discussing possible sources of information. This is "information seeking strategies." Parents can then help their children implement information seeking strategies by helping their children find useful resources. This is the Big Six step called "location and access." Location and access may have to be repeated during an assignment because some children may not identify everything they need right at the beginning. Parents can facilitate by brainstorming with their children alternate places where information might be available. In the "use of information" stage, parents can discuss whether the information the child located is relevant and if so, help the child decide how to use it. In the "synthesis" stage, parents can ask for a summary of the information in the child's own words, and ask whether the information meets the requirements identified in the "task definition" stage. The end of any assignment is the final check—an evaluation of all the work that has been done. Parents can help their children with the "evaluation" stage by discussing whether the product answers the original question, whether it meets the teacher's expectations, and whether the project could have been done more efficiently.

As children work through each of the Big Six steps, they need to think about what they need to do, and then they need to find appropriate ways to do it. This is their role—"thinker and doer." Children should be encouraged to be as independent as possible, but they will often have difficulty beginning an assignment because they are confused about what is expected of them. Whatever the reason is for their inability to get started, students have the ultimate responsibility for getting their work done. When parents act as coaches, they can help their children assume this responsibility by engaging them in conversation about what is expected of them, and

then by guiding them throughout the assignment using the Big Six Skills.

Why Assignments?

Assignments provide students with an opportunity to review and practice new material, to correct errors in understanding and production, and to assess levels of mastery. Every assignment is an information problem that can be solved using the Big Six. For instance, the goal of many assignments is to have the students practice a skill taught in class. If a child is having a problem understanding an assignment, the parent may help by encouraging the child to explain what it is he or she does not understand. The parent can use information seeking strategies to help the child identify information sources by asking questions such as: "Is there another student in your class, who can help you understand how to do this?" or, "Did the teacher give any other examples?" The parent can help the child identify information sources and suggest ways to get them. For instance, the public television network may have a homework hotline, the public library may have study guides, or a neighborhood child may be in the same class.

Technology and The Big Six

The Big Six approach recognizes the benefits of technology in education because computers are tools that help organize information. Software programs do a variety of functions such as edit written work, check grammar and spelling, chart and graph quantities, and construct outlines. Computers can also help with time management, setting priorities, and evaluating efficiency.

Using the Internet, students can connect to many non-traditional sources of information and are not limited to information contained on library shelves. They can use e-mail to talk directly with specialists and experts who can add a personal dimension to an assignment.

Conclusion

It is an axiom of American education that parents are partners in their children's education. Parents have traditionally participated by helping their children with homework. The Big Six approach can help parents effectively guide their children through assignments and at the same time help their children become independent learners and users of information. ❦

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Information & Technology, 4-194 Center for Science and Technology, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244-4100; (315) 443-3640; Fax: (315) 443-5448; e-mail: eric@ericir.syr.edu; or URL: http://ericir.syr.edu/ithome

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